

The Songs of Christmas

2. Zechariah's song

December 11, 2022

I've got a bunch of Christmas albums on my phone. I only listen to them at this time of year because it's just not the same to sing *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* in July. Many of the carols we sing have powerful messages if we listen to the words. Knowing the backstory makes singing a Christmas carol more meaningful. Take, for example, the well-known Christmas song *O, Holy Night*.

In 1847, a French parish priest asked a local poet to write lyrics for a Christmas carol. After the poet finished the words, he asked a friend to compose the music. The people of the town loved the carol and it quickly spread throughout France. However, a few years later the Church banned the song because the poet ended up becoming an atheist and the composer was Jewish. Even so, people continued to sing the song.

In fact, there's an undocumented story that on Christmas Eve of 1871 during the Franco-Prussian War, a French soldier ran out of his trench unarmed and began to sing this carol. The battlefield became silent. When he was finished, a German soldier came out and sang a favorite German carol. The next 24 hours they had a Christmas ceasefire.

A better documented story about his carol was reported by *The Marine Corps Times* in December 2004. In Fallujah, Iraq, Chaplain and Marine Reserve major Ron Comarda visited the bedside of a dying Marine, who had wounded in action. Comarda wanted to give him comfort, so he sang "O Holy Night" there among the medical equipment.¹

There is no way to measure the impact on people that song has had over the decades. And it was written by a guy who walked away from the faith and a musician who never believed in Jesus. God can use anyone!

The book of Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth, and that story includes a song by a man named Zechariah. Let me give you some back story on this song. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were old and had no children. Most of their friends and neighbors had started their families years before, but they couldn't, and it caused them pain.

They wondered who would take care of them when they were unable to take care of themselves. They endured the comments of neighbors who assumed God was punishing them because of some sin. But that wasn't true. Luke 1 says they were righteous in the sight of God. Zechariah was a priest and served faithfully.

¹ A brief history of 'O Holy Night,' from *America*, The Jesuit Review;
<https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2020/11/19/brief-history-o-holy-night-christmas-hymn-review>

They prayed, but nothing happened. They looked for an answer, but the answer was silence. In fact, God had been silent for 400 years. There had not been a prophet in Israel for 4 centuries. Then, Zechariah gets chosen by lottery for a special priestly duty: he was to carry the incense into the Holy of Holies in the center of the temple. Incense represented the prayers for the redemption of Israel and the coming of the Messiah.

While Zechariah was in the holy place performing this duty, an angel appeared to him. Luke 1:13-17 says,

But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Wow! Zechariah and Elizabeth are going to have a child, and not just any child, they are going to be parents of a prophet! Their son went on to be known as "John the Baptist." The angel said, "Your prayer has been heard." Wouldn't it be great to hear that?

Do you sometimes wonder whether your prayer has been heard? If you've ever felt like your prayer is just bouncing off the ceiling, or whether you are just talking to yourself, you are not the only one. Almost everyone has that feeling at some point.

I remember Jack Deere sharing at our Awakening Conference a couple of years ago that he was praying for one particular issue every day. One day he said, half to himself and half to God, "I wonder if my praying about this makes any difference." And he sensed God say to him, "It makes a difference to me."

The angel wanted Zechariah to know that his prayer had made a difference. God was going to give them a son who would be a world changer. Why? *Their prayer had been heard.* Gabriel didn't just say, "You're having a baby!" He pointed out that their prayer was a key link in the chain reaction that brought John the Baptist into the world.

And God hears your prayer, too. I don't usually write down what I'm praying for, but sometimes I do. And here's what I find: when I go back and read what I prayed about, God has answered that a high percentage of the time. Of course, that is encouraging to see, but reading those requests also shows me something else: that sometimes I forget that I've prayed for things. My prayer is generally not answered immediately. It usually takes a while, but eventually it happens. And along the way, I forget that I even prayed about it. When the matter works out, I'm just glad that's taken care of. I even thank God that it worked out, but too often I forget that I *prayed* for it to work out!

The angel met Zechariah at a place of prayer. Luke 1:10 says,

And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Zechariah's prayer was answered when he was praying with other people, not just alone. There is a power in praying together with people. Where do you need God to act on in your life? What issue? I encourage you have other people pray for it. Ask your Life Group to pray with you about it. While we are here in worship together you can pray for that as well.

We may be tempted to think, "I can just pray about this myself; I don't want to bring other people into it." Friends, God intends for us to bring others into it. We are to pray ourselves, but also together with others.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he responded saying "Our Father..." not "My Father..." He taught us to pray "Forgive US our sins..." not "forgive me my sins." He expects us to pray with others. There is power in multiple people praying for the same thing. There is something faith-building about praying with others – it's an atmosphere of faith.

For the last few years, our church has committed to pray 24/7 during the week leading up to Christmas. For a solid week, there is unbroken prayer around the clock for our congregation and community to experience Jesus at Christmas. We pray for people to come to Christ during the Christmas Eve service. And it makes a difference! I have seen God answer that prayer!

We are going to do it again this year. Will you commit to pray for one hour during Christmas week? If so, you can sign up for an hour on the app or on our website. We have some prompts to guide you in what to pray for. I can't promise that angel Gabriel will show up, but as you draw near to God it will make a difference in your life and in the lives of others.

When God answered Zechariah's prayer, Zechariah couldn't believe it. Literally. He could not believe that after all those years of praying and waiting, that God would answer his prayers in such an astounding way. So, he asks the angel "How can I be sure this will happen?" The angel informs him of who he is talking with. Luke 1:19-20 says,

The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

It's ironic that Zechariah felt that when he prayed that God was silent, and now that God answered his prayer, Zechariah is the one who becomes silent. Zechariah left the

temple unable to talk as judgment for not believing God's promise. But his silence was *also* a sign! After John was born, Zechariah was able to talk again, just like the angel said. That helped him believe; it was a confirmation that it wasn't his imagination. He really did see the angel, and his son really would be a prophet.

> That's when Zechariah burst into song. After 9 months of silence, watching the fulfillment of the miracle God promised, he can't contain himself. In Luke 1:67, it says,

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

Zechariah's song was guided by God; he was filled with the Holy Spirit. "Filled with the Spirit" doesn't mean feeling worked up about religious things. It doesn't refer to a certain emotional state – someone filled with the Spirit can experience a variety of different emotions. Rather, being filled with the Spirit means letting the indwelling Holy Spirit lead us and work through us. Zechariah was filled with the Spirit and prophesied. Prophecy simply means listening to God for others, then speaking that.

Most of the time that means speaking what God is saying to people about that moment. Sometimes God is speaking about the future, so to prophesy means to describe what will happen in the future.

There have been several times in my life when people have given me prophetic words that have been very impactful; times I knew that God was speaking to me, and it was pivotal. Those words were very personal and encouraged me when I needed it most. They clarified my path and gave me confidence that God was with me and was leading me. I have several recorded on my phone and I have replayed them when I need encouragement, and several of those prophetic words have been fulfilled.

We want that kind of encouragement for everyone at Crossroads. That is why for over ten years we have been deliberate to teach and practice hearing from God for others.

Zechariah prophesied through his song, and the message he wanted everyone to hear was **God does what he promises to do**. If there is one truth we can learn from Zechariah's song, it is that we can base our lives on what God promises, because he always does what he says he promises to do.

Zechariah sang both about what God promised Israel and what God promised him. In the first part of the song, he sings about the promise God made to Israel to send a Savior.

*⁶⁸ "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.*

*⁶⁹ He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David*

⁷⁰ (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

Here Zechariah is praising God for sending Jesus, who was a descendent of King David. Centuries earlier, God promised through the prophets to send the Messiah, and now in Mary's child, God is finally fulfilling that promise.

*71 salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
72 to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,
73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham:*

God promised Abraham that all the world would be blessed through him. Zechariah sang praise to God for fulfilling that promise by sending Jesus. It took over 1,500 years, but God did what he said he would do. The world had to wait, but God did what he promised to do.

*74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*

Then Zechariah sings praise to God for what God said about his son.

*76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
79 to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”*

The angel told Zechariah that his son would be part of God's plan for the salvation of the world. When the angel first told him, he couldn't believe it. Now he is singing that God would keep his promise.

The angel said in verse 14,

14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,

Notice that God answered Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayer in a way that filled the longing of their hearts, but also blessed the world. God will answer prayer and work in your life, but his blessing isn't to end with you, it is also to flow into the lives of others. For example, 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 says,

the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

God will comfort us, and then we can comfort others. What has God done in your life? How has he blessed you? How has he led you? God wants to pass that on! Did he answer a prayer? Tell someone else! Did he strengthen you through a tough divorce?

Encourage someone else who is going through the same thing. Did you put your faith in Christ and receive a new life? Share that with other people! You can be a disciple who makes disciples

God has given us thousands of promises in the Bible. How many do we believe? Have you ever thought “How can I be sure this will happen?” If you are worried about anything, there is a promise for that. For example, are you worried about money? God promises to provide. If you are worried about your future, God promises to lead us.

Here is a way to build your trust in God’s promises: **Declare God’s promise for your circumstance.** Find the promise that speaks to your situation and declare it. You don’t need to sing it like Zechariah, but you can! For example, if you need peace, declare God’s promise in Philippians 4:6-7:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

As we close, we’re going to declare God’s promise to us in song. The worship team is going to lead us in a song that declares what God promises us. The chorus says:

*I am who You say I am
You crown me with confidence
I am seated
In the Heavenly place
Undefeated
With the One who has conquered it all*